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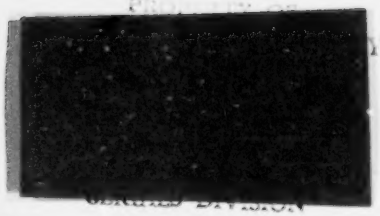

The United Nations and Some Problems of Public Understanding

UNITED NATIONS

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Address delivered by the Secretary-General, U Thant, to the News Media Seminar on 3 December at United Nations Headquarters. The Seminar, sponsored by the Stanley Foundation, Muscatine, Iowa, was held from 2 to 4 December.

In the United Nations we are often criticized for failing to make the Organization—its achievements as well as its shortcomings—understood to the general public. Today I shall speak of this problem with special reference to one or two specific situations.

I would be the first to admit that, so far, we have not succeeded adequately in making the nature and activities of the United Nations understood to the public at large. This failure is closely related to the character of the United Nations itself, to the way Governments use it, and to the nature of some of the situations with which the Organization has to deal. The United Nations as such cannot, in the effort to put itself across to the general public, conduct an intensive information campaign such as sovereign Governments sometimes employ—an activity which other Governments have been known to characterize as propaganda. As an association of 127 sovereign States which have conflicting views on almost every subject under the sun, the United Nations cannot indulge in propaganda or in selling a particular line of policy. The United Nations, in its public information activities, can only attempt to give an objective and factual record of what is happening and to explain as far as possible the actions taken on the decisions of its principal organs.

The United Nations as such has no sovereignty, and its authority for direct action is usually very limited indeed. To get anything done through the United Nations one must usually work by persuasion, argument, patient negotiation and an endless search for consensus. This is, by and large, not the stuff of which heroic actions or striking policies, let alone news, are made. The Secretary-General, as the chief civil servant of the United Nations, although he is sometimes wrongly believed to have wide and independent powers, can for the most part only do what one or other of the principal organs of the United Nations can agree that he *should* do. If he feels obliged to take an initiative himself, as he often should, he must first be sure that the attitudes of most Member States will not make it useless or even counter-productive. Otherwise he will squander what little authority the Charter gives him in premature and unfruitful actions.

I said that our failure to make the United Nations understood is in part related to the way in which Governments use the Organization. It is a fact that many of the problems on the United Nations agenda, especially on the political side, are there largely because Goverments have been unable to think of anything else to do about them. This is true of hard-core problems such as Palestine, *apartheid*, Kashmir, Cyprus or the question of Namibia (South West Africa), and it is also true of some international crises which even the strongest nations do not wish to face head-on. To some extent, at least, the United Nations has become a dumping ground for apparently insoluble or excessively dangerous problems, and it follows that the Organization attracts a good deal of popular criticism when it too fails to solve them. In this process the Organization itself, and its servants, sometimes provide a convenient scapegoat for hard-pressed Governments. This seems to me to be a valuable, if largely negative, function, although it has sometimes been abused or over-exploited, and I mention it only because it is important to an understanding of our public relations difficulties.

I mentioned the nature of some of the questions with which the United Nations has to deal, as another factor in the public relations problem. The fact is that there are some problems which Governments cannot or do not wish to face alone, but on which public opinion requires them to take a stand. The fact that such problems are not susceptible to a quick or easy solution is usually concealed at the moment of crisis by the public emotion which they have aroused. The United Nations is a very convenient place for such problems. At the United Nations the responsibility can be shared—or shifted; concern can be publicly expressed, and a valid formal reason for not taking unilateral action can be created. I think, for example, of the Hungarian crisis of 1956. There was, as far as I know, no Government which was prepared to react to that crisis with significant force, although the United Nations reached its conclusions on the situation by a very large majority. When the General Assembly's resolutions on Hungary had little or no immediate practical effect, however, there was a persistent tendency, especially in the Western Press, to ascribe the failure of the United Nations to act to my predecessor, Dag Hammarskjöld, and it was even implied in some quarters that he had failed to act in Hungary because he was more interested in taking measures in the Midle East against the triple attack on Egypt. Quite what he was expected to do in a situation in which no sovereigr

Government was prepared to take action was never explained. This was a classic example of the United Nations, and for that matter the Secretary-General's scapegoat role.

Especially in critical times, it is widely believed that because a moral assessment requires that something *should* be done, it *can* be done, and in the United Nations there sometimes seems to be a view that if Governments are unwilling to take a certain course of action, the Secretary-General should take it anyway, even if he has been given no authority and no support to do so by the Members of the Organization. The recent tragic civil war in Nigeria provided an example of this phenomenon. Not one of the then 126 Members of the United Nations ever moved, as far as I know, to bring the Nigerian civil war to the Security Council. The reason is obvious. Nigeria is a Member of the United Nations, and the Nigerian Government strongly maintained that the war was an internal matter in which no other State or outside agency had a right to interfere, a view shared by the Organization of African Unity.

I attended all the assemblies of Heads of State and Government of the Organization of African Unity when the question of the civil war in Nigeria was discussed. The African Heads of State and Heads of Government attach very great importance to the Charter of the OAU, which stresses the determination of African States to safeguard and consolidate their hard-won independence as well as the sovereignty and territorial integrity of their States. With this provision in view, they adopted year after year resolutions recognizing the territorial integrity of Nigeria and they even proposed a three-step plan to end the starvation, misery, death and destruction in the areas of conflict in Nigeria. The Government of Nigeria accepted these proposals and the insurrectionists rejected them. A very influential section of the world Press criticized the Government which accepted the proposals and applauded the side that rejected them. I made a lengthy observation on this subject at one of my press conferences here, so I do not wish to elaborate on this matter at this time.

The basic issue that the civil war was an internal matter and that the United Nations could intervene only at the request of the Nigerian Government, as in the case of the Congo, was recognized by other Governments, who are rightly concerned with upholding the principle expressed in Article 2 (7) of the Charter concerning the domestic jurisdiction of Governments. At the very outset of the civil war in Nigeria, I wrote to General Gowon and offered my good offices for the purpose of attempting to evolve some peaceful solution to the ominous situation which had arisen. For the reasons given above, General Gowon felt unable to accept my offer, which nonetheless stood and was repeated later on. I understand that various other leaders who made similar offers received similar replies. While I well understood General Gowon's response, I deeply regretted my inability as Secretary-General to help directly in forestalling the horrors of the war in Nigeria. I have since been accused in some circles of "passivity", and even of indifference, to the sufferings of the Nigerian people, as if the sovereign independence of its States Members was not, for better or for worse, a basic principle of the United Nations which is especially binding on its Secretary-

General. I might add that having failed to get acceptance of my offer of good offices, the United Nations did the best it could to alleviate suffering through humanitarian aid, and through my appointment of a personal representative in Lagos.

In my own experience as Secretary-General, the most misunderstood, misstated and deliberately distorted episode has been, without question, the withdrawal of the United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF) from the Middle East in 1967. I would hesitate to revert to this much publicized subject, were it not that totally misleading and fanciful accounts of it continue to appear, sometimes emanating from people who have every reason to know the true facts and to understand the real situation in the Middle East at that time. The full record has been published by the United Nations, and I shall not go over it again in detail. I merely wish to comment on it and on some of the mistaken judgements which persist in spite of that published record.

I may say that no one was more acutely aware than I was of the potentially fateful consequences of the Egyptian demand for the withdrawal of UNEF, and I was the first to point them out in no uncertain terms both to Cairo and to the Security Council, and to urge President Nasser to reconsider his course of action. I did this first by urgent representations through the United Arab Republic Permanent Representative in New York and, four days later, in personal conversations with President Nasser in Cairo. On neither occasion, unfortunately, was I successful in persuading President Nasser to change his course or, in Cairo, to rescind his decision to blockade the Strait of Tiran, which was announced while I was actually on my way to Cairo.

The hard facts of this very hard situation were as follows. The central fact was that UNEF was stationed on United Arab Republic territory only, and that quite apart from the universally recognized sovereign right of the United Arab Republic to request the withdrawal of UNEF at any time, we were faced, by the time I received the formal demand for UNEF's withdrawal on 18 May, with a virtual *fait accompli*. United Arab Republic forces had reoccupied the buffer zone, which alone had made UNEF's function possible for 10 years, and had ousted UNEF from its posts on the line and at the entrance to the Gulf of Aqaba. Furthermore, the Governments which supplied the two largest contingents in UNEF had made it known that they had been approached by the United Arab Republic Government and would immediately comply with its request for withdrawal of their troops. One of these contingents was manning all the posts in Sinai and on the Strait of Tiran. Furthermore, I knew all too well from UNEF's long experience that since the Force was only stationed on the United Arab Republic side of the line, despite the original General Assembly intention that it be deployed on the Israel side as well, active United Arab Republic co-operation was indispensable both to maintain the Force and to provide a reasonable measure of security for its personnel. If that co-operation was withdrawn by the United Arab Republic, the Force could not subsist, let alone function.

It is sometimes forgotten or ignored, as was most recently the case in the memoirs of a former Foreign Minister of the United Kingdom, that UNEF was set up by the General Assembly, not the Security Council, and that its entry

into Egypt was negotiated personally, and with great difficulty, with President Nasser by Secretary-General Hammarskjöld. The only provisos concerning withdrawal made in 1957 when UNEF was first stationed on the line between Israel and Egypt, were the so-called "good faith" agreement between Dag Hammarskjöld and President Nasser, which I immediately drew to Cairo's attention when the question of withdrawal arose in 1967, and Hammarskjöld's later undertaking that if Egypt requested the withdrawal of the Force from Sharm-El-Sheikh he would bring the matter to the attention of the UNEF Advisory Committee, which would determine whether the matter should be brought to the attention of the Assembly. The first of these provisos was a very brief agreement in which the Government of Egypt and the Secretary-General agreed to be "guided in good faith" by the relevant Assembly resolutions in actions related to UNEF. This was as near as Hammarskjöld could get to any commitment from Cairo concerning the maintenance of UNEF in Egypt.

In accordance with the latter proviso, I summoned the UNEF Advisory Committee on 18 May, as soon as I received the formal United Arab Republic request for withdrawal. Although some of the members of the Committee were most apprehensive, as I myself was, of the possible results of the withdrawal of UNEF and were reluctant to accede to the Egyptian demand, all recognized both the legal validity of the demand and the practical impossibility of insisting on UNEF's continuance in the face of Egyptian opposition. No member of the Advisory Committee proposed bringing the matter to the General Assembly, and as a practical procedural matter it was highly unlikely that enough support could have been found to bring the problem before the Assembly. It was also obvious that the Security Council would be deadlocked in any discussion of the situation at that time. This was, I presume, the reason why no move was made by any Member Government to bring the matter before either body. Thus, since Israel was unwilling to accept the Force on the Israel side of the line, an action which I proposed to the Permanent Representative of Israel on 18 May, and which was rejected out of hand, there was literally no immediate practical alternative to acceding to Egypt's request for withdrawal, and no Government at that time or since has been able to suggest any workable alternative.

This did not mean that the Force was immediately to leave the area. In my reply to Cairo I made it clear that the Force would be withdrawn in an orderly, deliberate and dignified manner, and for the time being it was simply to be concentrated in its unit areas behind the line, its functions on the line having in any case already been forcibly suspended by the United Arab Republic Army. In fact, it was not intended to move out any UNEF units for some weeks, and, with the exception of the Canadian contingent, they were all still there when Israel attacked in Gaza and Sinai on 5 June, two contingents suffering casualties at that time. The fate of the Canadian UNEF contingent was indicative of the real difficulties of the actual situation. When, as a result of certain public statements by Canadian Ministers and the publicized dispatch of two Canadian naval vessels to the Eastern Mediterranean, the United Arab Republic Government stated that it could no longer guarantee the safety of Canadian UNEF personnel

and requested their immediate withdrawal, the Canadian Government arranged for them to be flown out at once on 31 May, some weeks earlier than the scheduled withdrawal date. This unfortunate development deprived UNEF of its air unit and its logistical services.

In the light of these facts, which have been on public record from the start, I have always been puzzled at the persistent use in some Western capitals of the word "precipitous"—surely "precipitate" was the word they were looking for—to describe my reply to President Nasser's demand for withdrawal. The implication that the troops had been "precipitously" withdrawn from the Middle East area was the opposite of the truth. They were not, in fact, scheduled to depart for some weeks. The hope, of course, was that in that time it would be possible to work out a formula by which the peace-keeping functions of UNEF could be resumed. Obviously the last way to persuade President Nasser to agree to such a course was to behave as if UNEF was an occupation force, which it very definitely was not, having neither the right nor the equipment to use force, but, unfortunately, many official statements in Western capitals did give precisely this impression and were deeply resented in Cairo. Such attitudes made it more difficult to argue for the continuation of UNEF.

I reported this sequence of events to the General Assembly on 18 May 1967, and on 19 May I also reported to the Security Council on the ominous situation in the Middle East as a whole. In that report I characterized the situation as "extremely menacing", and drew attention to the steady deterioration along the line between Israel and Syria, the increase in Al Fatah activities, the intemperate and bellicose public utterances on all sides and the persistent rumours of troop movements. I drew attention to the new dangers which had arisen from the Egyptian request for the withdrawal of UNEF, but pointed out that UNEF was "a peace-keeping and not an enforcement operation" and had only been accepted by the United Arab Republic in the first place on this clear understanding. In stressing that UNEF's removal from the line had created a "brutally realistic and dangerous situation", I suggested that at least a limited United Nations presence on the Egypt-Israel line could be maintained if Israel would agree once again to participate in the Egypt-Israel Mixed Armistice Commission. I concluded by saying that the situation in the Middle East was "more menacing than at any time since the fall of 1956".

It has often been said that I should have tried to "negotiate". This, of course, is precisely what I did do, but I did not believe at the time and I still do not, that, after my first effort to get President Nasser to change his mind had met with an uncompromising refusal, a useful preliminary to further negotiations in Cairo would have been a public refusal to recognize Egypt's recognized sovereign rights in relation to UNEF, an attitude which in any case, as Secretary-General, I had no possible right to adopt toward a Member State of the United Nations.

I arrived in Cairo on the afternoon of 23 May, having learned only *en route* that President Nasser had announced his intention to reinstate the blockade of the Strait of Tiran. In response to my question as to the timing of this announce-

ment, President Nasser explained that the decision to resume the blockade had been taken some time before, and that it was considered preferable to announce it before rather than after my visit to Cairo. This answer, incidentally, seems to dispose of the allegation which has since been frequently made that President Nasser was surprised by my acceptance of his demand to withdraw UNEF. Indeed, it would have been odd if he had been surprised, since his own troops, by moving up to the line and evicting UNEF posts on the line and on the Strait of Tiran on 17 and 18 May, had removed the basis for UNEF's operation before I had even received the formal request for UNEF's withdrawal.

As I reported to the Security Council on my return from Cairo on 26 May, my major concern was to try to gain time in order to lay the basis for a *détente* and in particular to avoid a clash between the United Arab Republic and Israel over the blockade, which Israel regarded as *casus belli*, and I urged that all parties practise special restraint to allow for a breathing spell and to let tension subside, suggesting various practical measures which might assist this process. Unfortunately, these measures were not adopted, nor did the Security Council achieve the necessary agreement, or even harmony, in its discussions on the Middle East in late May to influence effectively any of the parties to modify the collision course on which they appeared to be set. In Cairo, I had also suggested to President Nasser the appointment of a United Nations Special Representative in the Middle East to act as a go-between and moderator during this period of unusually dangerous tension. President Nasser agreed to this suggestion, but since it proved to be unacceptable to Israel, there was no point in going ahead with it.

In repeating all of this old history, it is not my intention to apportion blame for the six-day war to any of the parties concerned. It would be utterly pointless and irrelevant to make such an attempt, for the six-day war grew out of the underlying causes and tensions of the Middle Eastern conflict. Nor is it particularly relevant to try to assess in retrospect the failure of the United Nations to prevent this disastrous episode. The fact is that the Security Council in its meetings before 5 June 1967, despite all warnings and signs, displayed a catastrophic, though predictable, lack of consensus concerning the ominous situation in the Middle East, and there was never any practical possibility of the General Assembly being called in, before war broke out, to consider the situation. I certainly can claim no superior wisdom or effectiveness in the days before the six-day war. Like everyone else concerned, I was trying to deal with a situation in which the Governments of the Middle East countries, in a state of tension heightened by misunderstanding, rumour, hatred, propaganda and a wilful misreading of the portents of disaster, became set upon a collision course from which no one proved able to divert them.

UNEF was one of the breakwaters set up to control the tide of Middle East dissension, and it eventually collapsed because its constitutional basis, its geographical location and its very nature were not strong enough to withstand the pressure. I must confess that, second to the disasters of the war itself, what I found most disturbing about the 1967 situation was the eagerness of some Governments, and important sections of world public opinion, to seize upon the with-

drawal of UNEF as the main and primary cause of a disaster the real cause of which was the failure over the years to tackle the underlying problems of the Middle East conflict. It was apparently easier to pretend that UNEF was an enforcement operation which could, and should, have prevented by force the movement of Egyptian troops on Egyptian sovereign territory, than to face the tough realities of the Middle East situation and the true nature of UNEF as a peace-keeping instrument which had no right to use force and which, from the beginning, had operated entirely on the basis of the consent of Egypt to its presence.

The full record of this episode has been available to the Press and public since June 1967, but it is surprising how few of the people who make public statements on the subject seem to have bothered to read it. Those who *have* read it seem, for the most part, to have been convinced, if reluctantly, of the true nature of the situation. Some, including one of the most distinguished living French journalists, have even gone as far as to publish a reappraisal of their original attitude.

Naturally I dislike and resent some of the personal accusations leveled against me as the supposed author of the 1967 war, but I have spoken at length on this subject today rather to illustrate some of the difficulties of making the United Nations understood, and also because I believe that the United Nations and its Member States cannot succeed in the immensely difficult tasks which face us if problems, however disagreeable, are not faced squarely, and if in difficult times there is a tendency to shift responsibility and find scapegoats rather than to face facts.

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